

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: KEN FLORES

Having a seemingly overnight rise from suburb comic to nationally touring headliner, I sat down with Ken Flores (@kenflores300) to discuss the road, his journey in comedy, breaking out of his set, being a voice for others, building an audience, and more.

You're on the road touring right now. How's that experience been?

I went on the road for the first time in September with Martin Amini and that was a surreal experience. That was my first taste of the road, last year in 2022, at the end of the year. Then in January, I did a gig at HaHa Comedy Club. I co-headlined with the guy that I'm touring with now, Rene Vaca. Then from there, every weekend we just went on the road. I have not been home since January, man. I moved from Chicago to LA about two months ago, but I haven't even been able to enjoy LA or anything because we haven't been able to go home.

I feel like a lot of comics dream of going on the road like that.

I'm gonna be real honest with you: I never traveled, I was never a guy that was like, "Oh, let's go on vacation here, let's check out this city." I know a lot of comics that will fly into a city and they'll load up on spots, but I never really had the network to do that. The first time I got a taste of the road, my followers were already growing and stuff, so I was able to be spoiled and perform for people that already knew who I was. But as far as the road itself, it's a different kind of motivation. I felt like when I was in Chicago, I was in a writer's block. It got really repetitive, even though I was breaking my way into the clubs and getting spots that take people years to get. I was happy about that, but even then it was just like, "I want to experience something." I didn't realize how much new material I would be able to pump out by just going to a different city. But as far as the lifestyle, the reason I even got into comedy was because I was a heavy drinker, I was a heavy into drugs, and I needed something to break me away from that. I wanted to do something with my life besides look forward to the weekends and spend my whole check on bullshit. So I got into comedy, and I didn't know this, but it's full of alcohol and drugs. I took it all in: the traveling, the shows, the drinking, the drugs. The first six months of being on the road, from January until now, I was really going hard. There'd be times when we'd be in



three different cities, and I wouldn't sleep in any of them. The only time I would sleep was during flights. That kind of took a toll on me. My body was begging me, like, "Hey, take a break on the drinking, take a break on the partying." If you want to do this long-term, if you want to be able to tour every year, you have to be healthy. I see it now when I'm in LA. When I'm doing spots, most of these comedians that we look up to are walking around with water bottles, hot tea. At first, I was like, "Wow, that's fucking lame." But when you realize this is their life and they do this every night, you have to do the tea, you have to do the water. I lost my voice twice on the road already. I didn't cancel any shows, but I did feel like I let the audiences down because they don't get the full, best version of me. I think I got it out of my system as far as the crazy side of things, but I want to make sure that I can adapt to this lifestyle in a healthier way.

Do you feel like you've toned it down?

I'm pretty fresh at this. I'm sounding like I made a huge life change, but I didn't because last week was my birthday. I was going hard and then my body just kind of shut down on me. I was having trouble breathing and all kinds of stuff, man. This week I told myself that I wasn't gonna drink. I was gonna slow down. No drugs, nothing. So tomorrow

will be a week sober. And I'm excited. My body's already feeling a little bit better. I'm waking up early. Most of the time I was waking up in hotels with just enough time to shower, get ready and go do the show. So now I wake up early, I got iced coffee and shit, you know? I get to enjoy the day a little bit more.

What's some of the work you're putting in off stage?

My thing is I don't want to go back to a city and run the same hour. So I want to write more, that's my thing right now. I'm performing my set, especially in the new cities I haven't been to, but every show I try to put in one new bit. And if it starts working, I'm putting it to the side, like, "Okay, this is gonna be part of the new hour." So I'm building the hour as I'm doing my other hour. I'm doing a lot of writing as well as hitting the gym. I'm a very animated person when I'm on stage, but I'm a big guy as well. I weigh like 400 pounds, man. So for me to be that big, I can't just move around, jump around, do Sebastian Maniscalco type comedy. It's not that easy, especially cause some of these places use pallets for stages and shit. I don't want to break somebody's stage. I'm trying to hit the gym so I can be in better condition as well. Talking for an hour, you run out of breath, you feel me? So I wanna be the best version of myself. Trying to keep the mind going as well as the body in shape.

It sounds like all these opportunities have almost been a wake-up call for you. You're like, "I gotta get my shit together and make the most of this."

Yeah, to be honest with you, I was in a race to either make a living out of this or die. That's how I was living my life. It was very fast paced. It was very reckless. And now I'm like, "Wow, I can make a living doing this." People love me across the country and line up for meet and greets and shit. It's like, "Okay, I know that I can do this. Now I got to be healthy so I can do this for a long time." There's a lot of greats, like Patrice [O'Neal], Ralphie [May], who unfortunately had their careers cut short due to the lifestyle they were living. I don't want to be another one of those guys, you know?

I'm curious about your start in comedy. You started in the burbs right?

Yeah, I was born in Chicago. I was raised in Humboldt Park. But I started hanging out with the wrong crowd, so my parents moved me to Aurora. I moved to the area where it's nothing but Mexicans, so it was like the same thing. But I did YouTube when I was like 15, 16, and I was just doing real hack stuff like, "Mexican moms be

like." I had a few videos actually go viral on World Star Hip Hop. I got a taste of that entertainment world, like, "I want to be an entertainer." And right around when I was 21, 22, I was like, "I want to get back into entertaining," but I couldn't get back into the YouTube thing. I just felt like that wasn't me and I wanted to be as genuine as possible to myself. I didn't want to have to clock in when I went to work, you know? I was working at PNC Bank at the time, I was a teller, and the owner of the Comedy Shrine in Aurora used to bank with us. Every time he would come in, I would mess with him. He kept inviting me to his open mic. He's like, "Man, you're really funny. Come to the mic, come to the mic." Then one day I went, just to see, and I guess this is my big head or ego talking, but I watched 40 people go up and, in my head, I was like, "These people suck!" I was like, "I'm better than that." So, I signed up, and then once you sign up, you realize, "Oh shit, this is not as easy as I thought." You kind of get hit in the face with a reality check. But at the same time, if you get that one big pop, you get bit by the standup bug and you're addicted. Ever since I went up the first time, I couldn't stop.

What happened from there?

I mean, I've been very fortunate. People don't like it when I say this, because I guess it's not the normal traditional standup career path, but I got booked for a paid gig after my first open mic ever. It was like a snowball effect. I would do a show, then they would book me from that show to another show. I've probably done maybe 14 open mics in my whole comedy career. It's pretty crazy to say out loud, but it's true. And I wasn't driving; I had my car repossessed because I was making real bad decisions. So living in Aurora, I had to take the Metra to Chicago to do spots. I did one open mic at The Comedy Bar during COVID. They were doing the patio mic and I just did one set and they passed me. From there, I got in at Laugh Factory. They do this

show called Verified Laughs, and they would do a draw for a guest spot. I commented for like three weeks straight and finally I won. And when I went up and did the spot, I fucking murdered. So I was blessed enough to get those opportunities and I capitalized on them because I knew I couldn't drive back and forth to do mics every week. I couldn't afford to bomb, you know? Eventually I got into Zanies. Then we just started chopping up clips and that shit took off. Now I'm about to sell out two shows at Zanies Rosemont this week. I'm blessed that it was able to go this way, but I had to do it because I had no other option. I just knew I didn't want to go back to school. I knew I didn't want to work a regular job. I put my all into this shit, bro.

If you weren't doing mics, were you nervous for your shows?

Oh, I was on my Slim Shady Eight Mile shit, bro. I used to throw up before going on stage. My hands used to turn ice cold, all that shit. And then especially going up in front of strangers. Doing clubs like House of Blues, because it's like all tourists, you might not get the same reactions, the same laughs. That all went away with reps, bro. You do enough shows, you're not gonna be nervous no more. Especially when you get that following and you get called on stage and the song drops and they know that that's you coming on stage. The crowd goes crazy. That kind of shoves off my nerves before I even get started, you know? But before? Yeah, there's no fighting it, bro. I was just ice cold. Luckily, I do fast paced comedy, so it's fairly quick when I'll get a laugh. It might not be a big pop, but once I get that first laugh, it washes over me and I go from there.

And how did you build your initial set? Were you just going up fucking around for 10 minutes?

I used to sit down, like on a Friday night when I wouldn't go out, I had a notebook, just a regular notebook and a pen, and I would bust down a gram of coke. I would do coke lines and write my full set word for word. I wouldn't break out of my set. Never. Even if somebody heckled me, which people didn't really heckle me cause I'm a big guy. But I would just write page after page. I went through like four or five notebooks trying to get my 10 minute set together. And I would just try it at every show, and eventually it started coming together. I would invite my friends to shows, but then they would be like, "Man, you do the same shit every time." And at that point I was scared to break out of it because I was like, "It works, though. I don't want to break out of it. I feel like this is all I got." But they were like, "Dude, you're so funny. When you break out of it, when you fuck around, you're so funny. Try it, try to be yourself on



stage." Eventually I was getting booked so much in the city where it's like, "Okay, well, I got five shows today. I'll fuck around at this bar show." And little by little, I started breaking out of my set. Once I did enough reps, enough sets, I was able to be comfortable. And once I got comfortable on stage, that's when it was a wrap. I hate to suck my own dick, but I'm so quick on my feet that I would always have something to say, and that's what helped me build the set. Just me being me. Now it's like, "Okay, I've been doing it for five years. Now I know how to write a bit." But it did take me a while. It wasn't easy, trust me. I just started doing comedy the way I do comedy now, and I feel like I'm still only at the beginning. I feel like I could be way better, especially now that I'm getting my behind the scenes shit together, my health and all that. I feel like it's only gonna make me a better comic.

What do you feel like you can still improve on?

One thing I really want to improve is my vocabulary. I didn't go to school too much. And when I did, I had bad grades, whatever. So some of my favorite comics are comics like Sammy Obeid and Geoffrey Asmus, who are really book smart, and are able to take that knowledge and go and turn it into comedy. Even if you don't understand

what they're talking about, they're so funny that they make you laugh at that shit. I feel like if I grow my vocabulary, if I expand my knowledge, read a little bit more books, I'd be able to come up with more bits. I feel like anything I do, I can come up with a bit. If I read more books, if I watch more documentaries, if I learn more words, I feel like I can definitely expand my knowledge and be able to bring better comedy to people. Especially when you do a room like The Comedy Bar and it's all tourists or all white folks, I can't go up there and just do my Latino shit. I wanna be able to rock any room, bro.

You mentioned struggling to break out of your set. I think a lot of comics can relate to that, feeling like their jokes work but it's all they have. What advice would you give to comics that feel stuck in their material?

I think that you yourself will get tired of having to do it because it starts to feel like a job. And once you stop having fun with it, your mind will push you to break out of it. But also, let's say somebody heckled me while I was on stage, and in my head I had a comeback that was so good, but I just didn't trust myself to do it because I didn't want it to bomb or break out of my set. I would be on my way home and I hated myself. Because I'd be like, "Man, what if I would have done it? What if it would have got a big pop?" I got tired of living in the "what if". And trust me, the "what if" will kill you more than if you do it and it doesn't work. I'd rather bet on myself and say everything that comes to my mind on stage. It's like roulette, because you put your chips on the table and it might not hit every time, and it won't hit every time, but when it does hit, I promise you, you'll have a big smile on the way home and that feeling will outnumber every other time that you went home and didn't try some shit, bro. I just started to bet on myself. I was tired of going home and thinking, "What if I would have said it?" You can't go back in time, you know? You'll only get that room and that audience at that specific date, and the next time it might not work the same.

I want to ask you about some of your goals. What are you trying to do long term?

I have friends that write scripts, I have friends that are doing comedy as a gateway to get into Hollywood for movies. For me, I just wanna do standup. I just wanna write, I wanna tour, I wanna sell tickets, I wanna grow a following, and that's it, bro. I just love comedy that much. I don't wanna be in movies, but obviously if the opportunity comes, I'm gonnado it. But I just wanna tour for the rest of my life, write new material, and make

people happy, you know? There's a lot of people like me in Chicago, there's a lot of people like me around the world that think like me, and we just don't have a voice. There are Latino comics, like Gabriel Iglesias, but he's not like me. He didn't grow up in the hood. He wasn't a drug addict. He didn't grow up like me, so he doesn't speak for me. But there's a lot of people that I can speak for that don't really have a voice in comedy. One of the things that makes me the happiest is when people tell me, "This is the first time I've ever gone to a comedy show. I relate to all your shit, bro, and I had to come see it." I wanna be that voice. I just wanna grow and do this shit forever, bro.

Being able to speak for people is a really cool, powerful thing. When you're writing material, how intentional are you about trying to be relatable?

I try to make every story personal. We're so similar, and it doesn't have to be just Mexicans, Filipinos, or other people. A lot of us are way more similar than we think. People come up to me all the time, they're like, "Oh my God, my mom's the same way!" For example, I got a bit right now about how my parents used to take me to the Chinese buffet growing up. It's like, "My parents would take me there for birthdays, baptism, my grandma died. It doesn't matter, we'll be there. By the time a crab rangoon touched my plate, I didn't even think about my grandma anymore. Fuck that bitch." Most people would be like, "What the fuck? Don't disrespect your grandma." But there's a lot of people in this world that don't fuck with their grandma, bro. So, I pull those people out of the woodwork so they're like, "No, this is real life." In real life, some grandmas are bitches. And that's

"I GOT TIRED OF LIVING IN THE 'WHAT IF'. AND TRUST ME, THE 'WHAT IF' WILL KILL YOU MORE THAN IF YOU DO IT AND IT DOESN'T WORK."

just from real life experience. I don't got a good relationship with my grandma, so I put that in the bit and it went well. I feel like it just comes back to being the voice for people that fucked up a lot in life. But now we can laugh about it together, you feel me? Some of us dug ourselves into a hole that we felt we could never get out of. My life, it was fucked. And now to be able to do this — I just wanna give people inspiration. If you feel like you're in a dark place, like you won't be there for long, you'll get out of there. I feel like I get that inspiration a lot too from Felipe Esparza. He's a comedian who is now a mentor of mine. He was somebody who talked about doing a lot of drugs, being real fucked up. Same as Joey Diaz was real fucked up. Everybody knows that they had a crazy past and now they're successful comics. I want to be the young version of that.

Has Felipe given you any good advice?

One of the things that people will always tell you is to stay humble. I was living check to check. I have apps on my phone that front you \$100 for a week until payday because your account's negative. So when you start getting checks for \$6,000 for one show, it can be real easy for you to be like, "Fuck everybody that didn't book me; fuck everybody that didn't fuck with me," and just walk around like you're the shit. But the biggest thing is to stay humble, bro. I want to stay humble because I've been at the bottom, and I know that this shit can get taken away from me at any moment. I never wanna lose my heart and who I personally am. That sounds cliché, when people tell you to stay humble, but I think it's important. That's what it is for me right now, is to keep my feet on the ground and know that I'm out here representing for people. To stay humble, I take that to heart.

You've been able to really build this online audience for yourself. Can you talk a little bit about your strategy behind your social media and what your thought process is?

For me, one of the biggest inspirations was Andrew Schultz. I'm not a big fan of him now, just because he's gotten hella big and you have to just stay in your own lane in a way, but I'm a big fan of how he came in the game, started putting his shit on YouTube and just kind of gave a middle finger to the industry. So I was like, "Well, fucking let's do that." Again, I don't have the biggest vocabulary, I'm not the best looking guy, I'm not the Matt Rife of the game. So I got a lot of shit stacked against me already. So I know that I gotta at least be funny, you know? I moved in with somebody who was doing video and he was my roommate for about two years. We were supposed to do video for my podcast, but he was taking pictures of me on stage, cause as a new comic, that's like your favorite thing. You want a picture of you with the Laugh Factory logo in the back. But eventually, you get bored of that shit. You're like, "Damn, I'm at the Laugh Factory every other day." I'm not gonna upload a picture every other day of the same shit, just me holding a mic. I was like, "How about we start putting some content out?" I had a few videos go viral on TikTok that were just me recording stupid shit, like food stuff. I remember the fire alarm went off at Olive Garden and I walked out with my breadsticks. I put that on TikTok and it got like a million views. So I was like, "Wow, it's that easy to go viral. Let's see if we can do it with my material," and I started chopping up clips and eventually they started shooting up. I made it a goal to put out at least one clip every two weeks and then eventually one every week. Then that also pushes me to write more, because at that time, I wasn't doing too much crowd work yet. So I was like, "I need new bits. I already put all my bits out." So it kind of motivated me to write more. It pushes you. You light a flame under yourself and either the material's gonna be trash because you're just trying to pump out shit, or you're gonna pump out good shit because you know that if it's trash, it's not gonna go anywhere. So it made me even a better writer. Then of course the crowd work, once I started breaking out of myself, those are easy clips. That's easy money if you're really funny.

Do you have any clip advice for comics back home?

People don't know where to crop. Sometimes I see a clip that's 32 seconds, but it gets a thousand views. But I know if that clip would have been 12 seconds and they cut it at the right time, they could do millions. So I take a lot of pride in my cutoff times, you know? The guy that I'm working with right now is named Orlando, he does videos for Rene Vaca, and the way they edit their videos has a lot to do with the engagement from the audience, where the zoom ins are. Everything counts, bro. I'm very meticulous with what we include in a clip, what we don't include in a clip.

Will you cut stuff to make the joke shorter, even if it's all going well?

100%. Sometimes if it's a newer bit that I'm working on that got a crazy pop or a tag, I'll put the tag out. It's a 14 second clip, but the bit is almost a minute long. So then people will hear it live and they'll be like, "Oh, that's from the video!" But then they'll hear the full bit and be like, "Oh shit. It leads to that!" People think that they have to clip a whole bit. You don't, bro. This is the internet; people don't fucking know. Clip out 10 seconds of something that's actually funny and put it out. You'll realize you don't need to put out a whole bit.

What advice would you give to comics who are concerned about burning their material or sharing it online?

Nobody gives a shit, bro. People don't remember. If you keep it in their face, they'll remember who you are. Cause they're like, "Oh, that's the guy. He's funny as fuck, whatever." But people don't remember, bro. People will tell me, "Man, I seen that shit on your internet, but it's even better in person." Nobody's ever sitting at my shows like, "Oh, I already heard this." They're like, "Oh, here's the one that I like." People don't give a shit about burning material. There's so much content out there, not just stand up, but all kinds of shit. You feel me? You're on fucking TikTok watching cars crash and bitches shaking ass. You're not gonna remember what the fat guy said about his grandma.

Hard to compete with bitches shaking ass.

You're like, "Oh yeah, this is awesome." You forgot about the stand up bit already. So trust me, put it out. Nobody cares. Eventually, if you shoot a special, do it again. The network will shoot it into a different algorithm, a different wave of people, audiences. But for now, if you're sitting at home and you got hella material, and you're not selling tickets and none of that, put that shit out, bro, because nobody's gonna come get us. Netflix is not gonna come get you out of your mom's basement and be like, "Oh, thank God you didn't put any of that material out." Fuck that shit, put that shit out. I'm telling you, bro, I don't have no TV credits and I'm selling out 300 seat venues. I was at the Comedy Bar last month, I did six sold out shows at the Comedy Bar. I'm going to Chicago again this month, I'm already gonna sell out two Zanies shows in Rosemont. That's 500 seats back-to-back. And that's not even a flex, I'm just saying put out the material and people will fall in love with you. Build that audience. The audience is your currency. That is worth more than any TV credit. Fuck the TV credit. It's 2023, build your platform. The clubs don't give a shit about credits. They give a shit about ticket sales. They give a shit about money and you got to bet on yourself, bro. The material, fuck the material. If you're a really good comic, you'll come up with more shit.

You got me ready to jump through a fucking wall.

That's my goal, man. I'm telling you, do it bro.

I love that: you've gotta think bigger and build your audience, not just perform for random people in Chicago.

It's the best bet. Because I'll tell you what, not everybody likes my material. Just because I have a bigger following on social media doesn't mean I still don't go to shows and people are looking

at me like, "What the fuck? Is this guy talking about cocaine? He's talking about hating his grandma. What's going on here?" I'm not appealing to everybody, don't get me wrong, but once you build that following, you don't have to worry about that shit. The shows are sold out before any walk-ups can even buy the tickets. Now you're performing for your people, and there's no better feeling because it's like butter. There's nothing like that. It's funny because people back home will tell me, "Oh yeah, you gotta be careful when you go to LA because those crowds are a little bit weird." But it's like, "No, I don't go to LA to perform for random rich people. I go to LA to perform for my people." When I go to Houston, it's my people waiting for me. They know what they're gonna get. They want that crazy shit. Then I don't have to go and do spots and have to tell people, "I don't know, the audience was weird." We don't deal with that shit anymore. And we're doing it for our people that fuck with us and do love us. Now, I will say this too, though: that also goes back to the same staying humble and keeping your feet grounded. Because if people are laughing at anything you're saying, that's how a lot of comedians lose their spark. Because now they're like, "Oh, they love me. It doesn't matter. I'm starting to put out mediocre shit." You can't do that either. I try to stay hungry. That's why I still go home and do spots. I love to do random spots. Keeps you on your toes, bro.

The last question I have for you is about the Chicago scene. If there was one thing you could change about it, what would you change?

I wish the segregation wasn't as big as it is. There's a lot of killers on the South Side of Chicago that never come out to the North Side. Whether it's the drive or people haven't heard of them, they just don't get booked. There's a few comics that do both South Side and North Side, but there's comics that are only South Side and there's comics that are only North Side. I wish that everybody would be everywhere. That's the only thing I would change because the segregation really does suck. It's not to blame nobody; it's just the way it is. It just kind of goes with the city. Other than that, I got nothing but love for the city. Nobody's ever done anything to me but show me love. I've never beefed with anybody. I've never talked shit to anybody. I've never got word that anybody dislikes me. I don't dislike anybody. I'm never on Facebook commenting on no bullshit. I feel like that has helped me be very likable, because there's people that you only see in Facebook comments, never at shows, never killing, mostly bombing, but they're always in the comments. I never want to be one of those guys. So yeah, I just wish it'd be less segregated. Other than that, I got love for everybody in Chicago. I wouldn't change anything about it.

Before we go, is there anything you wanted to plug or leave people with?

The "what do you think about people burning their material" question comes up a lot, and I feel like that's a thing that holds a lot of people back. Don't worry about that. That's the only thing I want to tell people. Don't worry about that. It's not a big deal. I also will say this too: invest in yourself, man. When I was starting to put out clips, I had to pay my camera guy to put them out. Nobody's going to work for free, you know? So I was literally eating ramen just so I could fucking pay my guy. I'm tired of people saying, "I don't want to pay for that," or "I'm too lazy for that." Like, bro, you don't know what the fuck can happen. Your life can change. My life changed because I made that sacrifice for a year, paid my guy, we put out hella clips, and now I'm good. So invest in yourself. Don't let procrastination, laziness, or financial situations keep you from getting those opportunities and putting those clips out. Do it, man. Invest in yourself because nobody's gonna come and get us. Just For Laughs comes around once a year, and most of the time, you're not gonna get picked. They pick one or two people. They're not gonna come and get us all out the motherfucking city. So do it yourself. Stop waiting for opportunities and invest in yourself and get it done, man.



Ken Flores' Top 10 Chicago Comics

- 1. JAMAL GUICHON**
- 2. JOEY VILLAGOMEZ**
- 3. ABI SANCHEZ**
- 4. GEOFF ASMUS**
- 5. CHRIS HIGGINS**
- 6. JEFF BRUMFIELD**
- 7. FAB MONROE**
- 8. ANTONIO KAREEM**
- 9. ERICA NICOLE CLARK**
- 10. GABRIEL ALVIZO**

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

CHRIS GRIECO

"He has to be one of the best hosts in the city, doing crowd work, getting in and out of material, sitting in the silence of the start of a show and bringing an energy that I don't think any other host in Chicago does. I saw him at showcase at a club a while back, and he was the most professional comedian on the show that night. The guy is polished, and quite frankly should be hosting regularly at every club in the city."

NICK SAN MIGUEL

"Nick is an extremely creative and talented individual who has paired electric material with a deadpan style. Never talks about 'deserving' more stage time but he 100% does. I honestly can't wait to see how well he's going to do in front of a packed, paying audience."

"Stands out at every open mic I see him at."

RALPHIE ROBERTS

"A great act that I feel many comics in Chicago don't get to see unless they've done Zanies showcases with him. He should be on every stage and should be a well known name amongst the comedy community."

"Saw him at Zanies and haven't laughed that hard in a while. Absolute killer."

LEXI COSTANTINI

"For the last year she's produced the Take A Shot Open Mic at My Buddy's. If you've never been there it's one of the best mics in Chicago, a room full of love and support and actual audience members sometimes too! It's an LGBTQIA forward space where genuinely only assholes bomb. Lexi has spent her year producing that mic, also producing a caring environment where comedians can learn or be born."

ERIK WEST

"Erik West has been killing it at open mics for the past year with some of the funniest sets I've ever seen. Even in the worst rooms, I'm always excited to see him. Unfortunately, he's not on social media, so it's impossible to book him. If you see him, book him, then shame him for not being easier to book."

NOE NOEL

"He's kinda back and forth between Denver so I get it, but he's legit one of the best writers in the city and he deserves more (club) time."

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

DREW GREGORY

"He's a really smart, funny comic who's working super hard but not getting the recognition he should be getting for how clever his jokes are. He also has really great delivery and stage presence."

LAURA HUGG

"She is incredibly genuine and authentic on and off stage. I believe she's one of the most underrated comics in the city and doesn't receive enough recognition for her hard work."

RYAN KUSHNER

"Great joke writer, unique and interesting persona, detail oriented and writes more than anyone I know. The man is prolific."

LUCY FERRANTE

"Every time I see Lucy she's super sweet and has killer material. She runs an awesome show at My Buddys and has been super supportive of me ever since we met. She will make any lineup better!! Book her!"

BLAKE BURKHART AND CHRIS TRANI

"Blake and Chris for the same exact reasons: they're seasoned Chicago veterans who produce multiple shows and give back to the scene. Plus, they're killers onstage and they've got great, unique voices."

HANNA LJUNGHOLM AND REBECCA JAFFE

"Hanna and Rebecca are two very funny people who are similar because they just moved here and I predict they're going to be staples of the scene very quickly."

KIERON HARRELL

"No matter where I go, whether it's a mic or show, he's busting his ass. Really solid material and his hard work is paying off."

HUNTER HIRSH

"A beautiful blend of energy and creative thought that can only come from a master trained jazz musician. Hunter finds takes that haven't been pointed out and gives himself to the performance of them fully."

SHOW SPOTLIGHT: SATIRICAL RACE THEORY

Satirical Race Theory is a brand new improv show featuring an all-black cast of Chicago's most gifted improvisors and sketch writers. I sat down with director Adonis Holmes and producer Kim Whitfield to discuss the show, their vision, and more. SRT concludes its first run July 1 at the iO Theatre. Don't miss it!

For people who haven't heard of SRT, can you give us a little background on the show?

A: The original kernel of the idea for the show was to create a show specifically for black improvisers to come in and perform on, where they're allowed to be themselves without the restrictions of having to perform a certain way or use a specific type of point of view. Then it morphed into this very fun stylized show, using our current political discourse as a through line. But at its core, it's just an opportunity for black improvisers to be silly and have fun.

K: Historically, there hasn't been that many spaces in the improv community specifically for black and brown artists to engage in the art form without feeling the pressure to represent a certain kind of blackness. Whereas for this show, we just want to invite and celebrate all of that.

You guys have been running for a few months now. What's been some of the feedback you've received from audiences and performers?

A: To start off with the performers, there have been a few that have been performing in the Chicago comedy scene for years, who've come up to me and been like, "A show like this would never have existed in a pre-COVID comedy universe."

Why is that?

A: I think it stems from the fact that there weren't enough people in positions to advocate for those spaces. Or the people who were in those positions didn't see the necessity of having an all-black show. But fortunately, Kim and myself are blessed to be in positions where we still have the understanding that it's more necessary than ever to have spaces geared toward black performers. Just being able to fuck around without having the pressure of having non-black eyes judge them or place them in categories.



K: To add to that, I think overall the conversation has just shifted, right? Before what was deemed accessible or even progressive was this idea of including performers of different perspectives, but without the right leadership or people who shared that perspective, it can easily get translated to exploitative or inauthentic. A lot of black and brown comedians and improvisers in the city want to work and love this form, so they still engage in these spaces, but they come to these unfortunate costs of having to perform for predominantly white audiences, which presents its own problems. Or they have to play on teams with people who don't know how to support and advocate and collaborate with them, just because they're from different worlds. There's always that conversation around the quality of their work or their level of expertise, just because they're dealing with these spaces and people who don't understand or align with their perspectives and experiences. We all know what it means to have that endurance of being a black performer in this city. Getting people with those same and similar perspectives coming together to develop and deepen that understanding and culture for a larger audience is so necessary and it is truly so fucking funny.

Has being around other black performers who are being their true, authentic selves been an educational experience for you as a performer?

A: Every rehearsal and every show has truly felt like a cookout. It's truly felt like family coming together, messing with each other, picking on each other, enjoying each other's company and creating an environment where we can just take off. We can take off any expectations, take off our mask. And I think that's been the benefit of being a part of this show. It's that we're all black, we're all funny as hell, and we can all have fun with each other and not expect any transaction or any expectations from that.

That's awesome.

K: I think to Adonis's earlier point, to our own pleasant surprise, we found that a project like this has actually come to be sort of an act of resistance, even in its own existence. I feel like when it comes to like black art, whether it's comedy, drama, performance, visual, there's always this unspoken expectation for it to hold this meaning and to be impactful and to speak to society. And in a way, we can do that by just being ourselves. Being on stage and being as black as hell as we want on stage is an act of freedom and resistance in its own right.

To circle back to my earlier question, what's been some of the feedback you've gotten from audience members?

A: Not to toot our own horn, but people have said that this is one of the funniest improv shows that they've seen in a long time. Black people who have seen the show know inherently how powerful it is and how much of an experience it is to see these six performers being themselves on a stage that's mostly been filled with shows that have had a majority white performers, if not all white performers. For black people who come to see this show, they are acutely aware of the experience that they're getting themselves into. They latch on it immediately and they're taken into this world because they're part of the show; they're part of that immersive experience of witnessing this very black, very funny show. And for non-black audiences, they're enjoying it as well. I think they're the ones who probably have more of an expectation of like, "Oh, they're not talking about politics as much. Where's the discourse?" And it's like, the discursive elements of the show are the scenes, are the funny characters, are the very silly, stupid moments that the performers find on stage. That's the discourse that's happening, and that's the

most important part of this show: getting people from the South and West Side communities to come out and engage with an art form that has been deeply segregated and kind of gate-kept away from them for such a long time. That in and of itself is like the heart of the show. And I truly think every single audience member who sees the show will be leaving with a newfound awareness of the black experience.

How has the show changed since it first started, and how do you see it continuing to evolve through July?

A: It's so fun with the nature of improv. We're truly starting with a very blunt edge and then each show we're slowly sharpening it bit by bit, which is very fun. As of now, the show is much leaner. We've gone through the process of trimming things down in order to really get to the meat and of the show a lot sooner. And so I think the more the show goes on, the more we'll be discovering things that we need and we'll be discovering things that we don't necessarily need. Maybe trimming this, maybe getting more dancers because we have The Puzzle League opening the show, setting off an incredible energy. They start off the show with such palpable, amazing energy that the improvisers use, which is very fun. But yeah, we're slowly whittling down. We're sharpening that knife and it's only gonna get more sharp and more precise as we go along.

K: One of our initial goals for this project was for this to kind of be an oasis for all black improvisers in the scene, especially those who regularly perform and engage in North Side institutions. So in regards to the evolution of the show, right now we have an 18 person company filled with cast members and we just want that to grow. We have it on a rotational basis and it's a very flexible schedule, so we can make sure everyone gets a good amount of play time. We wanna bring in new faces and have more people that don't regularly get to play with each other. And then also opening audiences up, specifically black audiences,

to the idea of improv. I truly can't wait for my mom and family to see it, because they've seen my shows before and they've seen snippets of what improv is. They're always like, "Oh, you're still doing plays, right?" I think this is just such a fun show to open the door to a larger black audience. Black people still really don't know what improv is, or they really can't place it. This is the perfect show to be like, "Oh, this is what this is." Because truly the black experience is improv; we've been improvising since we got to this country. So I think this is absolutely the show where people can come and have this be their introduction to the world of improv.

If other black improvisers see what you're doing and they're inspired by it, what can they do to become part of your next run or whatever else you might have in store?

A: We have a training center at the theater we work at, the iO Theater. Sorry to make that plug, but for comedians who are excited about the show or just truly wanna grow their skills on stage, I think the IO theater is such a perfect incubator to develop that talent and confidence. We're doing a lot more pop-ups, so we're sending some performers to do segments of the show at various venues, and we're also connecting and networking there as well. So I think just come to the space, experience that, and reach out about performing opportunities.

Obviously it was difficult to get this show off the ground. What advice would you give to somebody who also has an ambitious idea and wants to start their own show?

A: Share your idea with other creatives that you trust, because you can't do it alone. You're gonna need a network and really use that network as much as you can because if you can't do something, if you can't edit or take pictures, someone in your network knows someone who can. Really build and utilize that network, especially when it comes to Chicago comedy. It is a community. It is a network of friends, coworkers and co-collaborators who are constantly supporting each other and asking and inviting people to shows and helping and editing and writing things. So I'd say tap into your network, and if you don't have a network, find one. The easiest network you can tap into is improv.

K: I would also add to know yourself. Know what you want to do, and whatever excuse or reasoning or logic you have that's holding you back and telling

you not to move forward – just get rid of that. Because you're never going to do it; you're never gonna just say "Fuck it," and move forward. You have to push through that. And I think staying true to who you are and what the goal is. I think that's been a great guiding light for this project: just remembering Adonis' first proposal and how he structured what the show was gonna be. Although the form has changed and taken many different shapes, the goal has stayed the same, and that's because we had that conversation with ourselves knowing who we are, what we wanna accomplish, and how we wanna represent ourselves. If you're able to answer those questions, you can convince almost any producer in the city to work with you because the quality of your project speaks to the person standing behind it and advocating for it.

I think that's all really great advice. Any parting words?

A: This truly is a very, very fun, exhilarating show. As soon as you're sitting in your seats, the show has started and you're part of the classroom atmosphere. It's a fun experience. It truly is one of the blackest, most ignorant roller coasters people will be a part of, and I cannot wait for you to see it, and I cannot wait for your audience to see it as well.

K: Like we always say, we're not in the business of teaching anyone anything. But I will say, I am proud that this show is a great introduction and a starter course for people who literally have no idea what it is that we do. When you say comedy show, a lot of people think stand up or sketch. It warms my heart when people come up to me and are like, "I cannot believe that this is a thing. Did you guys make all of that up? How did you do that?" If someone truly doesn't know what improv comedy is, I would recommend coming to our show because it's a great appetizer into the wonderful world that is improv comedy.



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BRANDON PERL

IS AN ARTIST, DESIGNER, AND EDUCATOR LIVING AND WORKING IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS. A CURRENT MIDDLE SCHOOL ART TEACHER, BRANDON CONVEYS A VARIETY OF MEDIUMS TO HIS STUDENTS ON A DAILY BASIS FROM 35MM DARKROOM PHOTOGRAPHY, TO SCULPTURE, PAINTING, AND PRINTMAKING.

AT NIGHT, YOU CAN FIND BRANDON CREATING A RANGE OF DIGITAL AND ANALOG WORKS SUCH AS MURAL VINYL WRAPS, MERCH PACKAGES, PRINTS FOR HIGH-PROFILE BANDS, OR HIS OWN MERCHANDISE FEATURING HIS CHARACTER BXHD (BOXHEAD). BRANDON WOULD DESCRIBE HIS WORK AND STYLE AS "VISUAL VIBRATION". HE FOCUSES ON RHYTHMIC LINEWORK, LAYERING, AND COLOR TO CREATE COMPOSITIONS INSPIRED BY HIS LOVE FOR MUSIC, ENTERTAINMENT, AND LIFE EXPERIENCES.

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

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
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