

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!

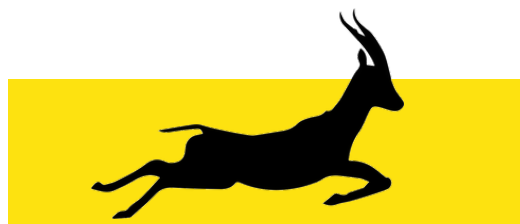
– Jerry



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INTERVIEW: DWAYNE KENNEDY

Dwayne Kennedy (@dwaynetkennedy) has appeared on Comedy Central Presents, Letterman, Conan, Premium Blend, Seinfeld, Martin, How High, and a whole bunch of other stuff. I sat down with the Chicago comedy legend to discuss his 30+ year career in show business and why nobody knows who the hell he is.

I was just reading [Mike Bridenstine's *The Perfect Amount of Wrong*]. Have you read it? You've got a whole chapter in here.

Somebody just asked me yesterday. No, I haven't read it.

It's cool hearing these old Chicago stories. I'm part of the scene, I figured I gotta learn a little bit about what happened before me.

Yeah, so you'll know what not to do.

Yeah, and I feel like you're the number one guy to talk to.

I'm your go to guy for what not to do! I'm your point man for that.

I mean, we can start there. I read this Vulture article and Sarah Silverman said it's crazy you're not a household name. And in your chapter, everyone's saying you were the biggest name in Chicago and had all this stuff happening in LA. Then you moved back and were washing windows. What happened there?

Well, Jerry, nobody can sabotage you like you. I don't know, man. I had done Showtime at the Apollo in New York and then a friend of mine took my tape and gave it to a manager in LA, and he got it to a casting director. One day I was in Chicago, just lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, and I get a call from a cat named Marc Hirschfeld, who was casting a show called 227. They asked me if I wanted to audition for it. So I went to LA, and I didn't get the part, but I wound up getting a holding deal. So I was out there and I did some roles. I did a guest spot on 227. I did a show called Amen. I did a show called Sugar and Spice, like guest spots. And I did Seinfeld. I was auditioning all the time, man. I got a few things. I mostly did not get things. I didn't study acting; if I had done that or taken an audition course, I'm sure it would have worked out better. Because for me, I would audition and usually get a call back, but then the further I'd go in the process, the tighter I would get and the more pressure I'd put on myself. So it would just be horrible.



Yeah, I imagine that's all out of your comfort zone.

I guess I was too arrogant or egotistical to take a class. When I first got out there, I met with an acting coach before I auditioned for 227, but I probably should have stuck with that. My mindset was, "Well, I didn't have to go to a class to learn comedy," not even thinking that with comedy, you can go up four or five nights a week and learn by trying and failing. It's just a more concentrated process with acting. You don't get to do all that. All those things I see in hindsight. But it got to the point where I just got frustrated, man. I stopped going out on auditions. They'd send me out and I would just pass, and eventually my agent got sick of me. It just kind of devolved, so I came back to Chicago and I was out of show business, and that's when I was washing windows. I did that for a while, then one day I said, "Man, I don't think I want to wash windows anymore." I was sitting out on what they call a genie seat, sitting on the 13th story of this building, thinking, "Man, I think my career is over after this one." I had still been writing and whatnot, so I started going back up in '95. I had left LA in '93. By fall of '95, I was doing standup again full time and my manager called me. I hadn't spoken with him in almost two years and he said, "Hey man,

I got a showcase I'm putting on at the Comedy Store. You want to come out?" So I go back to LA and my manager brings in everybody, like Universal and ABC. Set goes well, everybody's fired up again. I wound up getting a development deal. That was '95, and I was out in LA until about '97. Then I just got tired of it again. I don't know, man. I do stuff, work, not work, go out to LA, come back.

When you first moved back, I'm surprised you didn't go right back to standup if you were tired of acting.

Here's the thing: I wasn't so much tired of acting; I was tired of the rigor. I was tired of the auditioning and all the things that it takes to do it. The acting itself was decent. I kinda enjoyed it a little bit. But all the stuff you had to do was what I was sick of – the business part of it. Why did I drop out? I don't know, man. I'm not aggressively self destructive. I'm just more mildly self destructive. I'm not the cat that is going to shoot heroin or drink nine bottles of vodka. I'm just not gonna show up for stuff.

Well, you're back at it now. What do you think has changed?

I learned that if I don't do this, man, I'm going to be doing menial jobs for the rest of my life. So I might as well focus and try. And I enjoy it. That's the first thing: I love it. I do love it. But at this point, I either got to be in it completely or out of it. So I think I'm in it. I'm trying to be in it. I still have reluctance about some things and I have to adapt to some things, but I'm trying to be in it. I actually just agreed to do a Micro Set recording for Zanies. I've been approached about that before and I've always said no, just because my old school mentality is that you're giving away material if you put it online. But I just got to come up with more stuff, you know? If you're not online and you don't have a regular TV show, people don't know who you are.

Are you excited about that? I know you don't have a lot of material out there in the world.

Now, here's the thing: there's not a lot of me doing my material in the world, but some of my material is out in the world, and some other folks are doing it. So my material has traveled further than I have. But yeah, I think it'll be cool. I just gotta get over that dread of, "I'm releasing this and this is material I can't do again."

"I LEARNED THAT IF I DON'T DO THIS, MAN, I'M GOING TO BE DOING MENIAL JOBS FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE. SO I MIGHT AS WELL FOCUS AND TRY."

It sounds like you're trying to get out there more. Are you still driven to become that household name or do you not care about that?

I just want the money, Jerry, at this point. Like I said, I love the art. But I need the money. Now, how well-known I get, I don't really have a measure for that. I imagine being famous in my mind, but to me, it's safer in my mind than to actually be some household name. But the thing is, the household name is what can get you the money. Your fame is your cachet, and that is your access to revenue. So in that regard, yeah, but if I had all the money I ever wanted or needed, I don't know how diligently I would be pursuing any more notoriety. I've been around people who are really famous, and it might be entertaining or interesting or appealing for some moments, but when that's your life all day, every day, wherever you go? That starts to seem a little bit like a prison. I want to pursue the art. I love the art and I want to be an artist, but I'd rather be Picasso than Van Gogh, you know what I mean? Picasso was a brilliant artist and he made a lot of money. Van Gogh died broke and insane. So yeah, right now I'm closer to being Van Gogh. But hey, that's still something!

I can probably name, off the top of my head, 10-20 brilliant comics in Chicago who just cannot get out of their own way, but are so funny and deserve all the opportunity, all the money in the world. What advice would you give them about getting it together and not sabotaging themselves?

I can't give anybody advice because I don't know what it is that is preventing them. I could say, "Hey, if you don't do this, then this'll happen." But so what? Somebody might not care about that. That's the ironic thing about comedians: I think the things that make you funny are antithetical to being a productive, good human being. And I think that the self-destructive impulse to some degree is probably also the thing that makes you funny. I wouldn't know what to tell

somebody, cause I wouldn't know what it is they want. I mean, if somebody's saying, "Man, I wish I could stop getting into so many fights," well, maybe stop punching people in the face so much. I could tell you that, but maybe you enjoy getting into fights.

Do you think your self-destructive behavior is part of what makes you funny?

Self-destructive sounds dramatic. I don't know if it's self-destructive more so than it was idle. I think I lacked some of the qualities that you needed to pursue things and realize certain goals. Years ago, early on, I used to see Chris Rock in New York a lot. He wasn't famous, he was just starting out, and that cat used to bomb a *lot*. He would bomb a lot, but he never stopped. It wasn't that he wasn't good, he was developing and had talent, obviously, but you'd see him bombing at 8:00 o'clock at a club, bombing at 9:30 at another, and then bombing again. For me, I wasn't like that, man. If I had a bad set, I wouldn't go up again for weeks or months. That's not a thing that's conducive to getting you to the next step. There were certain things I wasn't doing that maybe I was not capable of doing at the time because of the way I dealt with things mentally. That was just the way I thought at the time.

Did each bad set really stick with you for that long?

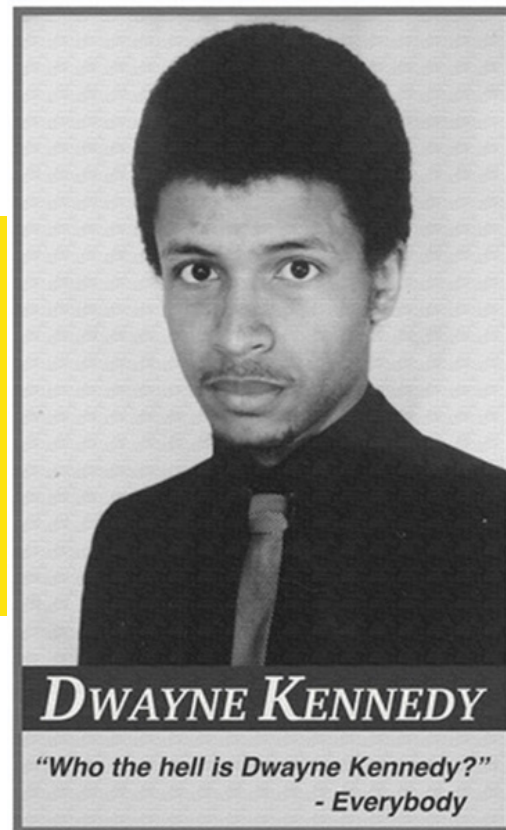
Oh man, oh man, phew, yeah. Early on, if I had a bad set, oh boy, it would be crushing. But the thing I've learned is that that's why you gotta go up immediately and get that out of your system. Then you realize you're going to have good sets, you're going to have bad sets. It's not the end of the world if you have a bad set. But for me, man, at the time it would be the end of the world. I'd be like, "Oh my god, if I can't do this, am I capable of anything?"

How many years in were you at this point?

This was Thursday. No, a few years. But, man, it took me a long time. I mean, I'm still not keen on eating it. But it took me a long time to get to the point where in my mind I have accumulated enough success that not doing well doesn't define me. That's the thing: you think, "Man, if I bomb, this is it. The jig's up. I'm never gonna be funny again." And then you start to realize, well, that's not the case.

Yeah, you have confidence in your ability and know that you're funny.

Yeah, I certainly believe I'm funny to somebody. Am I funny to everybody? No. Nobody's funny to everybody. Then once you accept that, then it's just a matter of



finding your audience. And there's things I'm still working on, still haven't done that I'd like to do professionally. There are certainly audiences I would like to perform in front of more regularly. That's the beauty of it though: you never stop learning, never stop growing. There's always something to learn. And then when people say, "Oh, you didn't make it," well, I did some things that I wanted to do. When I first started doing standup, my goal was to do stand up on television one time, and I did that. Then beyond that, I didn't know what the plan was. So now I have some other goals as well, but that's the extent to which I thought of it when I first started. But yeah, man, it took me a while to get enough psychological fortitude to persevere.

Have you learned anything about yourself through standup or through the audience?

That's a good question. I'd like to give you more answers than I'm going to give you, but I realize how tenacious I am. Even though I'm slow and I retreat and I take breaks, I'm not done. I'm not quitting, so it makes me realize my tenacity. What has

the audience made me realize? This sounds self-serving, but an audience helps to validate the fact that I think that I'm funny. If you laugh, that gives me validation. Oh man, I'm going to be thinking about that question for a while. We might have to do a part nine at some point.

I'm curious because you do a lot of social commentary: what have you learned to make your opinions more palatable for an audience that might not agree with you?

This is vague, but all I can tell you is to find the right language and the right tone and tenor. But here's the thing: I'm getting to the point where I would like to say things, and not that I don't, but more consistently be like, "I'm going to tell you this, the way I want to tell you, and you like it or don't." I don't have that gear. I respect people that do, and sometimes they have a harder road, but they cultivate a stronger, more fervent audience. But yeah, it's like you're a salesman. You find the way in, you find the language people are speaking, and you kind of feel out what they'll accept and what they won't. I mean, to a point — I don't want to pander. I want to say what I think and what I believe in a way that is also funny to you.

If something isn't working consistently, how quick are you to cut it in your editing process?

Well, I'm of the mind that everything is funny. You just got to figure out how to make it funny to somebody else. But if it's not landing, I don't just toss it. If I've said it, I probably thought it was a good idea. "Let me just figure out how to present it to you so you can see why I thought it was funny." That's the beauty of it: figuring out words, presentation, intonation, all those things.

Which of those do you focus on the most?

The writing is number one, but then the presentation is 1A. Because then it becomes not just the writing, it becomes who it is that's telling you the things that have been written. We didn't just hand each other sheets of paper with the things we said; we're presenting it to each other. Writing is essential, but then once you get the writing down — and you always have things to learn — but once that's solid, presentation is 1A, man. That's crucial. Otherwise, you're a humorist; you're writing and somebody could read it in a book. Which is great too, but you know.

So, I'm personally very writing focused. How would I start focusing more on the performative aspect? Physicality just seems like a whole nother beast.

I would say just continue to do what you're doing. Not everybody's physical. That might be your style: you might just be a straight monologist, flat footed, stand there. But if you desire to do more, I think eventually that will emerge. In my opinion, you don't have to dwell on that. But that's the good thing about doing material that you know works: now you become aware of other things, like, "I know the bit works. Now, how am I telling it? Where do I look? Where am I standing? How am I delivering it?" Sometimes just having something that works will relax you to where you can be more conversational or more demonstrative because now you're not worried about, "Is this joke funny?" Now you can take your time and look around, see what's going on and let things come in. Once you get comfortable with a joke or bit, then you can kind of explore in that and see how you're telling it. You never know what might come out of that.

I ask everyone this, but am especially curious to know your answer: if you could change anything about the Chicago comedy scene, what would you want to change?

I wouldn't change anything. I would add. I wish that there was at least one national late night television show being shot in Chicago. I think that would change the whole landscape of Chicago comedy. That's what I wish. Maybe Chicago could do with a few more dedicated comedy clubs, but there's certainly a lot of independent rooms. But I wish that there could be a national late night show out of Chicago.

THAT'S THE GOOD THING ABOUT DOING MATERIAL THAT YOU KNOW WORKS: NOW YOU BECOME AWARE OF OTHER THINGS, LIKE, "I KNOW THE BIT WORKS. NOW, HOW AM I TELLING IT? WHERE DO I LOOK? WHERE AM I STANDING? HOW AM I DELIVERING IT?"

How do you think that would change the landscape?

I think it would offer Chicago comedians a chance to stay in town. One show is certainly not going to accommodate every single person, but it would give a lot of folks a chance to develop and then do a show without having to go to New York or LA, or hope somebody from New York or LA sees them. There's a show in town that they could do, or possibly work on, write on, and then if the show was a hit, maybe there'd be another late night show shot out of Chicago. I wish that the food chain were extended in Chicago. Right now, Chicago is a great place to get good, but it's not a place to get work or to get famous. One show is not going to be the end all be all for everybody, but it's certainly going to change the landscape significantly.

Speaking of late night, when you did Letterman, did he say anything to you after your set?

I think he said, "Good job. Now get the hell out of here." Well, not so much that, more so, "Good job. Now I'm getting the hell out of here." I remember looking to my left, he came over and said good job, I think. I looked to my right — Paul [Shaffer] said something to me — then I looked back to my left and Letterman was gone. I stood there on the stage talking to Paul. We must have chatted about five or ten minutes. We were just going back and forth, and then that got to the point where I was like, "Man, Paul, I gotta get out of here." But that was it. Just, "good job," I think. But it was a cool experience. I was glad to do it. Grateful.

And with Seinfeld, that's such a historic show. What was it like being a part of that?

Well, at the time it wasn't historic. It was just a show on TV. And I had never watched it before I did my episode. I didn't watch it until three years after I had been on it, and that was only because I did it in '91 and they hadn't really hit their stride yet. Then in '95, I was back out in LA, living with my girlfriend at the time, and she loved Seinfeld. That's when I started watching it and I was like, "Hey man, this show is pretty funny. I think I was on this show." Now it's my favorite show, man. To this day. Sitcom is *Seinfeld* and drama is *The Sopranos*. And then that's it for me.

Last question: looking back after all these years, how has your comedy changed from when you first started? Was it similar to what it is now or was it totally different?

I think it was similar. I was influenced by Richard Pryor and a lot of his material not really being jokes, but bits — it's like a one man show with characters and that kind of thing. I was really influenced by him and Franklyn Ajaye.

Right out of the gates, like the very first time I went on at the Zanies open mic, I had this bit, and I probably could do that bit now. I don't know if this is a testament or maybe it's an indictment of how little I've grown as an artist, but it probably wouldn't seem that different from the stuff I do now in its tone. It's a long bit, but every now and then I've done it just to see if it would still fly. I think it sort of still does.

Maybe you could put it in your Micro Set as a nod to Zanies.

Hey, that's a good idea, Jerry. Maybe I will.

I mean, I don't want to tell you what to do.

Hey man, I'm taking all suggestions at this point!



**CATCH DWAYNE'S RECORDING
THIS THURSDAY, MARCH 21 AT
7:00PM.**

**VISIT CHICAGO.ZANIES.COM
FOR TICKETS!**



Comedians Recognizing Comedians

SAM BIRU

"Sam is getting very scary very fast. He was good him six months ago, and he's since turned into a monster I'd really prefer not to follow. Very excited to see how far he can take it. "

JEFFERY HALL (COMIC JUST JEFF)

"On the heels of his first album recording in May, calling out Jeff seems like a solid move. He is a hard worker and a funny dude (and also a sweetheart of a guy). His comedy feels simple and effortless, which is all part of his onstage vibe. He brings you in with stories of his family and makes you want to be part of that special group. Always a crusher. Always a joy to watch.:"

GINA PALM

"She is so funny and so consistent. I've seen her crush in front of so many audiences on so many different days. Whether she has had a good day or a bad day, she immediately is so calm and in control on stage. The audience always has a great time."

RICARDO ANGULO

"Ricardo has consistently great sets, works very hard, never complains, and is one of the most humble and kind comedians around. His jokes are so solid and he is so likable on stage. He should be booked more. I really hope he gets his flowers soon, because he absolutely deserves them!"

MATT MICHALSKI

"Matt is not only a hilarious comic, but he has quickly become an amazing producer too! Every show that he puts together seems to sell out, giving other comics the opportunity to perform to large audiences. Matt is a prime example of how you can be a great comic in your own right while also improving the comedy community and raising others up with you. We are lucky to have someone like Matt as a part of our scene!"

LAURA HUGG

"Underrated comedian who's long been a staple in the Chicago scene, turning stories of addiction and recovery into hilarious bits celebrating triumph and growth."

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

MAX SORICH

"Max is quietly crushing the Roast Battle tournament with great jokes and even better riffs. He's my new favorite to win it all."

MICHAEL SERIO

"Michael Serio is one of the kindest and hardest working character comics on the scene right now. The sheer amount of characters he has, his boundless energy, and his absolute commitment to the bit make him someone to keep an eye on!"

MARCUS HENDRICKS

"Marcus proves comedy is not an absolute meritocracy, if it were he'd be booked every night. His jokes are well rounded with act outs, impressions, and are always refreshingly silly. Check him out."

BRANDO HARRIS

"He writes really good jokes and he's doing everything right. He works hard and kills."

HARRY MEREDITH

"Harry always has unique and funny premises and great energy and likability on stage. It's obvious that he writes a ton and I saw him crush at a showcase last week. People should be watching him."

HARRY BREITNER

"Homie has been killing his roast battles lately and his show at the Lodge is so fun. People gotta see it!"

MIKE DWYER

"Although I've only been doing mics for 3 months and prolly don't know shit; his consistency is impeccable and his material is stuff I can only see someone of his prowess to do, which is why it leaves my cracking up each time I see him."

PETER BONELLO

"He drinks coffee now."

The Comedy Gazelle

Presents

VOUCHER

Featuring

Aaron Klein

Jon Diaz

Rebecca Jaffe

Michael Thomas Regan

St. James Jackson

Cassidy Kulhanek

Dan Docimo



Hosted by
Jerry Hamedi

Wednesday, March 27 – 8:00pm

Laugh Factory

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WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

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