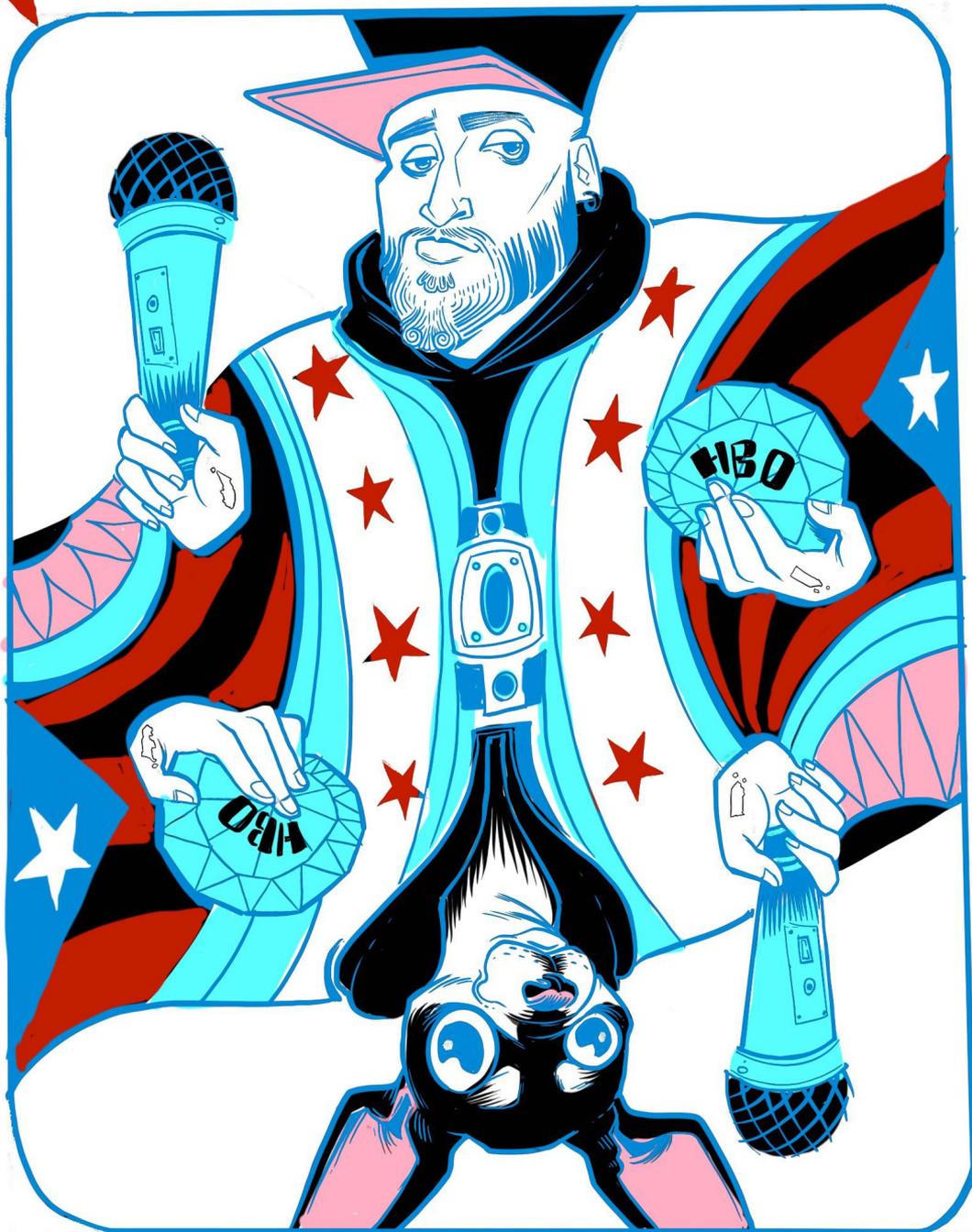


# THE COMEDY GAZELLE

THE LATEST IN CHICAGO COMEDY



**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:**

**ABI SANCHEZ**

# 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

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# INTERVIEW: ABI SANCHEZ

*Abi Sanchez is a monster. One of the biggest rising stars in comedy, he recently won the 2020 HBO Latino Stand up competition and headlined Zanies Old Town, selling out all five weekend shows. We talked HBO, nervous shits, relatability, confidence and more.*

**I wanted to congratulate you on the HBO Latino win, that's incredible.**

Thank you, man. I'm looking forward to it. We're gonna film this year. We're hopefully gonna be filming somewhere they allow people indoors.

**Is it a full hour?**

No, I think it's gonna be a half hour. Who knows.

**Are you nervous at all about recording an HBO special? That's a pretty big deal.**

I won't be nervous until I know the date and the location and I get it. Right now it doesn't seem like it's real. Right now it's just words. When they're like, "Alright, here's the date" and we're filming and I get there and it's like, "Ah shit, this is real," then I'll be nervous.

**Were you nervous about the actual competition?**

The only thing I was nervous about was how it was gonna be done. Because I didn't know if it was gonna be an audience, and then they told us two days before it was gonna be a virtual audience and I didn't know how the setup was gonna be. And then once I saw the setup I was like, "Alright this is great." There was this huge screen with 30 people on it and I was in the middle of a stage, and it felt like a show. I didn't want that feel of "Oh, you're doing a Zoom show." I wanted to feel like I was out doing comedy and that's what it was. And it was only five minutes, so I was like, "Alright, I got five minutes."

**How do you choose your best five minutes for something like that?**

You just gotta choose the jokes that you know you can get out in a minute or minute and a half and that are some of your funniest stuff. You don't tell any tags. You get to the meat of the joke then go on to the next bit. I ended up doing six minutes, but six minutes is still a long time. You still have time to get at least three fully formed bits out there. It seems quick, but at the same time it's like, "Oh, I can still get some jokes out here." It was good.

**And you weren't nervous? That's crazy to me.**

I was. I mean, I took two shits before the show. I was in



the bathroom like, "Aw man, I really gotta take this shit."

**Yeah, man. I'm a nervous pooper.**

I don't think that goes away. If it goes away then you're too comfortable doing comedy. As long as you still get some butterflies, you're gonna care and you're gonna wanna do it. When I was doing Laugh I'd be like, "Alright, how much time do I got before I gotta be up? 12 minutes? Alright I can take a shit." I always gotta go, it's fucking weird. Once that stops then I know I don't care anymore.

**I relate to that so much dude. Every single time. My first mic in Chicago was at Cole's and I pooped my pants before I got on stage.**

Yeah, well, you also don't wanna take a shit at Cole's. Mics I don't care so much. I'm definitely going there to fuck around. Shows and sets on a Saturday night, or if someone's crushing or I'm following someone who's a monster, "I'm like fuck, alright, let me get myself together" and I start getting a little nervous. But I feel like I perform better when there's pressure. I feel like the pressure and the nervous energy makes you go after it harder.

### **Interesting. When I get nervous I'm running shit in my head and then I fuck up my jokes.**

That's the one thing I gotta tell myself. I did a JFL audition and I followed Em Brown. I was sitting on the side and he was just murdering for the whole 5-6 minutes and I was like, "Fuck, I gotta change my set up. I gotta change the whole set." Then I stopped and was like, "Abi just do the set. Do the set you wanted to do." And as soon as I did it, it went well and I got invited to go to JFL. I always think to talk myself out of doing something and then I was like, "Just fucking do it. You'll be fine." Then that first joke hits and I get the laughs like, "Alright cool I made the right choice in keeping with this set." And if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. You get a lot of opportunities to do standup.

### **What advice would you give to somebody struggling with nerves?**

I don't know about struggling. I can tell you to just accept the nervousness. It's gonna be part of it and it shows that you care. And that's what you want. You want to know that you care. But if you're struggling and it's debilitating nervousness, I don't know what to tell anybody about that. But as far as standing on the sides like, "Man, I'm fucking nervous?" Alright, good. That shows you care about it. If you went up nonchalant and then you eat shit and you still don't care? What are you doing this for? You should care about doing it all the time. If the nerves are making you scared to get on stage, I don't have advice for that. But other than that, if you've got nerves, just live in it and let the nerves come out.

### **How do you see your comedy having changed from when you first started?**

I've learned to add a little bit more personality to it and not so much following the script. When I first started, I had a five minute set and I was like, "Alright, I gotta hit these in this order" and if I didn't, it fucked me up. But now I know the material, so I can go in and out and I can switch topics in the middle and then come back. I basically learned to be less rigid and more conversational. I just learned to be myself. That's one thing, you just gotta be an exaggerated level of yourself on stage. So if you're normally at a 6, you gotta turn it up to an 8 or a 9.

### **How do you exaggerate yourself, personally?**

Mainly movements and vocal inflections, where I just talk and emphasize a certain word. Normally when I'm just talking in a green room setting, I'm just conversing back and forth. But on stage, it's like, "Alright, now I gotta act this part out, I gotta be more showy, I gotta ratchet up the personality a little bit." Cause normally I'm just pretty chill. And when I have sets that aren't fun or I feel like are bad, it's because I was too chill. I didn't feel like I was happy to be there. I just felt like, "Alright we're here, let's just do this." I gotta be ecstatic about it. Even if I'm just standing there, you can tell energy wise: I'm moving around, my face gets more expressions on it. Just turning yourself up. You gotta find a way to be how you are with your friends in a room full of strangers.

### **Are you trying to work on anything right now, skill set wise?**

I gotta honestly show more confidence on stage. I have a tendency to look down a lot or look off. I kinda trail off at the end of sentences, when if I would've just said it out loud, it probably would've gotten a bigger laugh. You're always working on confidence. For me, I'm working on the confidence of looking directly out to the crowd, making eye contact, not looking at the floor at any point. Cause for this HBO thing, I'm gonna have to be presenting to a camera, which I've never done. I can't be caught looking down. So for me, it's performance wise. Cause the jokes I know are there, but you also gotta perform. I don't wanna come

**"JUST ACCEPT THE NERVOUSNESS. IT'S GONNA BE PART OF IT AND IT SHOWS THAT YOU CARE. AND THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT. YOU WANT TO KNOW THAT YOU CARE."**

off as any part of me that doesn't have any confidence in it.

**You just won this HBO competition, it's odd to me you think your confidence needs work.**

I'm confident in the jokes, but I'm not confident in the way the audience is looking at me. In my head I'm like, "How do I look to these people?" I'm thinking about that, like, "Ah shit, is this shirt too tight?" But they're probably not looking at anything, they're probably just listening and watching me talk. "Did I make a funny face? Is my face too mean-looking right now?"

**Every headshot you have.**

Yeah, and everyone's like, "You never smile." I don't like smiling for pictures. If you're gonna catch me smiling, catch me candidly. If you make me smile to a camera it's gonna look phony as hell. That's another thing I gotta work on, learning how to be fake.

**That's interesting. There's like an acting component.**

It's a performance. I was watching one of Chris Rock's specials and I think he did Brooklyn, London and South Africa, and the way they cut it, you could tell every step was the same. It was a choreographed thing the way he was moving on stage. You watch Chris Rock when he first started, he just stood there. Then as he got bigger, he started stalking the stage and it became a performance. That's the part I'm learning now. Now that I'm getting up more and doing longer sets, I have to be able to keep their eye on me. Sometimes I just stand on the stage and hold onto the mic stand.

**How do you start incorporating that into your set? I'm definitely the guy that stands still and leans on the mic stand. How do you get comfortable moving around? It just seems kinda awkward.**

I think of the joke that I'm telling and it's like, "Do I need to move for this joke?" Do I have to get away from the mic stand and maybe step a couple steps closer so it's like, "Listen to me. I'm off home base right now. I'm gonna talk to you guys a little bit." If you're saying something that's a longer bit or that might not get the most positive reaction, the minute you step forward and tell it with confidence it's like, "Fuck, I kinda believe this guy." Then you can always just go back and hold the mic stand. That way, when you let go of the mic stand, it kinda builds up some anticipation on the crowd's part. But it really comes



from knowing your set. If you go in knowing what set you're gonna do and you're beating that 15 minutes up for a month straight, then you're like, "Alright, where can I start incorporating a little bit of body language, act out type stuff." I think the jokes you learn how to tell first, and then for me the acting part is what comes later.

**I remember at one point we were talking at Laugh and you described your style as trying to put words to people's thoughts.**

Yeah, I feel like that's what every comedian does. You get those people who come up to you like, "Dude I had that same thought! I didn't know how to express it and you told it." That's what it is where it's relatable. I feel like I have very relatable stuff, but it's because people have had these thoughts, they just didn't know how to express it in a certain way.

**Would you say you prioritize relatability in your comedy?**

Yeah, I feel like if I can get a lot of people on my side, I just get 'em laughing cause that kinda disarms them. They're like, "Okay, he thinks the same way I think. I don't have to be embarrassed to laugh about this in a group setting." There's comics that do very niche references and someone might laugh, but then you hear that one solitary laugh and the rest of

the crowd gets judgey. Like, "What did *you* get about that joke?" Whereas I'll tell a joke and I feel like everyone kinda releases, like, "Oh, all these people feel the same way." And that's what I want everyone to feel, like we can all laugh at the same shit. I know there are comics who want to tell their joke and be clever with words. I want to do that too, but I want people to walk out of there like, "Fuck, that guy got me. He understood me and we understood him."

**Do you write a lot? You strike me as someone who writes a lot.**

No, I don't write a lot at all. I'm not someone who can sit down and write a whole new five minutes. I write a joke and then I tag the joke, and then if the tag can take a life of its own, that'll become a new joke. I also build segues and all this other stuff, and eventually I try to get it so each joke can stand out on its own. A lot of stuff comes from just repeating it on stage. I get on stage and I say it, and then I keep saying it and keep adding things to it. So I basically just write on stage for the most part. Otherwise it feels like homework.

**When I watch you I feel like there's always a little something different in there. Is that a goal for you, to always do something new?**

Yeah, I want people to be like, "Oh I like that joke you told, but you added something to it." Like yeah, I added a new tag. Because I don't feel like jokes are done. Until it's on a special or until it's out there for the world to consume, it's not done. There's jokes that I wrote 4-5 years ago that I can still play with and still have fun with. I see some people write jokes like, "Alright, that bit's over with." I'm like, "It's not. You can add to it and now you have an eight minute joke." That joke about my dog Chacha, it started with one line, and then I combined it with jokes about kids and jokes about drugs and now that whole segment is a 15 minute set. But it's because I didn't give up on those other jokes and think "Okay, I got all the laughs I could out of that." Keep adding to it. It boggles my mind when comics are like, "Oh, you're still doing that bit? Yeah, but have you heard it now?"

**Yeah you've gotta do your thing and figure it out.**

That was one thing that I learned: to stop caring about the back of the room. Because there's 100 people in between that are way more important. When you get off stage and you just crushed, you can't deny that. "Oh he's still doing that old material?" Yeah, but did you listen to it? It's not the same material you think. You might've heard the premise and thought I was doing the same joke, but no I've added a bunch of shit to it.

**What kind of advice do you have for someone who's trying to build material, but can only really do mics. How do you gauge material at a mic?**

If I got any chuckles on it. I think at a mic there are so many comics in the room, you work out the beats of the set and you just don't give a fuck. If you get four minutes at a mic, just do four minutes of a set. Especially in the beginning. Just try to get that repetition down. And it's hard because you want the respect of the comics that are at the mic, but you gotta realize that your goals aren't the same. If you're doing four minutes at a mic and doing three mics in a night, just do the same four minutes at every mic. That's how you build time. I think the most important thing is not to give a fuck about the comics that are in the room. And that's hard because a lot of the time they are the audience, but you gotta realize you're doing this because you want to get better. I think repetition is key. A lot of people hate repeating jokes over and over again, but you gotta fucking do it. You have to get out of that mindset of trying to impress the comics at a mic. Fuck 'em. Honestly. They don't matter, man. There's not another accountant that worries about what an accountant at a different company is doing. 'Cuz eventually, once I stopped caring about the back of the room, the back of the room started noticing what was happening in front of them.

**What advice would you give to someone looking to move to Chicago? Why should someone move to Chicago if they wanna start comedy?**

I don't know about now, but pre-pandemic, you could get all the stage time and it didn't cost you money and you weren't getting bumped by anybody celebrity-wise. There was a path to get into the clubs. You can get into the Laugh Factory here, whereas in LA you couldn't get in because you've got people with specials coming in. In Chicago, you can get up seven nights a week, two or three times a night. That's why this is a great training ground, you could go anywhere else and hit the ground running. And it's cheaper than living in New York. It costs a lot of money to be a comic, because you don't make any money. So if you go to New York and you're not in one of the clubs, you're still gonna have a job, but now you might not get up as much. Chicago's a place you can get stage time any time you want it, really.

**Is there anything you'd change about the scene if you could?**

I'd love it if more industry people looked to Chicago. Because you can't change people's personalities. There's always gonna be bickering within the scene. But the only thing I'd really change is for industry to come take a look at us. JFL would hold their auditions here and that was huge. Some people got picked, some people didn't, but at least we had some eyes here and they saw the talent we were working with. When I went in 2018 there were seven of us from Chicago that went, all in one year. All seven of us flew and landed together in Montreal. Everyone's like, "Woah, what the fuck. You guys roll deep." That's the only thing. I'd love for the industry to have more eyes on Chicago and realize how good we are.



# **BONUS: 10 COMICS ABI WOULD STOP TO WATCH**

- **EM BROWN**
- **CALVIN EVANS**
- **ADAM BURKE**
- **GEOFFREY ASMUS**
- **T. MURPH**
- **CORREY BOYD-BELL**
- **MATTY RYAN**
- **ALEX KUMIN**
- **JOEY VILLAGOMEZ**
- **MIKE SAMP**

# ARTWORK



**CHICAGO-BASED FRANK OKAY IS A MULTIMEDIA ARTIST WHOSE WORK FOCUSES ON URBAN ENVIRONMENTS, PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE. OKAY BEGAN THEIR CAREER AS A POSTER ARTIST FOR LOCAL BANDS AND HAS SINCE TAKEN THE FORMS OF PAINTING, ILLUSTRATION, ANIMATION, MUSIC, AND SURREALIST LATE-NIGHT TALK SHOWS. PRESENTLY, FRANK OKAY IS WORKING ON A NUMBER OF PROJECTS INCLUDING “SIGNS THAT ARE GONE,” A DRAWING COLLECTION OF SIGNS GONE MISSING FROM CHICAGO SINCE 2008. THEY ARE ALSO IN THE CONCEPTING STAGES OF A NEW MULTIMEDIA PROJECTION-BASED PROJECT CALLED “NWS.”**



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# BOOK REVIEW: THE BEDWETTER

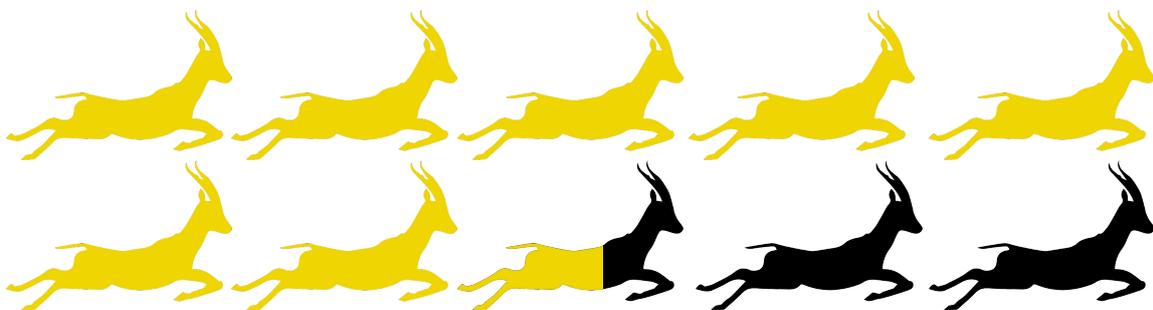
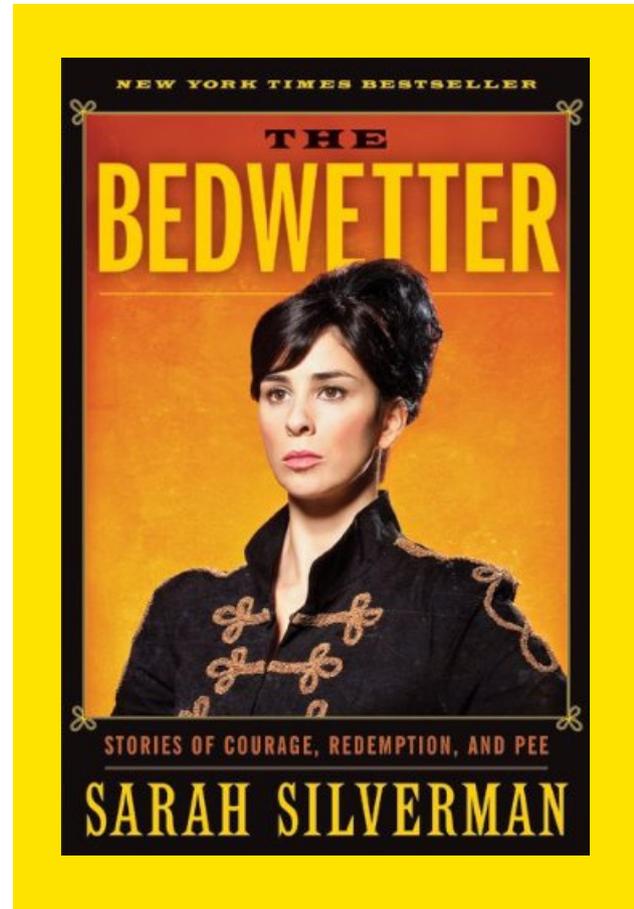
By Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

First off this book was really relatable. Like Sarah, I wet the bed until I was an adolescent. Just the other night I relapsed and urinated all over my boyfriend. He woke up with a new fetish. Now seeking more role models that pissed the bed. Experience required: 10+ years of embarrassment.

The Bedwetter is full of hilarious stories about Sarah running wild with other young comedians. My favorite being her and Louis CK stripping naked and throwing their clothes off an 11th floor hotel balcony only to take the elevator down, get dressed and race back to the top to do it all over again. Goals AF.

Sarah is a great writer. She turns the book format on its head including a Midword and an Afterword by God. Neither were necessary, but creative liberty never is. In the end you can tell how proud she is to be surrounded by the people who allow her to be who she really is - a juvenile pervert.

7.5/10 Gazelles



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

**WANT TO CONTRIBUTE? SELF  
PROMOTE? ACKNOWLEDGE MY HARD  
WORK? DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

